

Resistance on the Line

A History of Australian Telephonists and their Trade Unions, 1880-1988

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To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except as acknowledged in the text. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

This dissertation takes as its subject the women and men who operated and supervised Australia's telephone exchanges from 1880 to 1988. It is a study of their situation as workers and as trade unionists, and develops an analysis that their trade union organising, ideology and strategy were inexorably linked to their work experience. It shows that telephony in Australia, while state controlled for most of its history, was a capitalist enterprise characterised by unfree labour, workforce segmentation and a hierarchical regime of control focussed on maximum productivity and service coverage at minimum cost. The state as employer deployed a range of structural and ideological measures to maintain control, while workers engaged in a range of resisting practices, from individual insubordination to collective industrial action.

While the political economy of the industry and broader society differentiated the objective interests of telephony's antagonists along class lines, the class experience and indeed class struggle occurred under the aegis of gender and race categories. This study recognises gender in particular as a conscious element of management efforts to control and exploit its workforce and, conversely, of workers' struggles to secure material improvements and human dignity. Gender here is not so much an external context imposing itself on class struggle, as a dynamic process engaging individuals from both sides as they pursued their interests or perceived interests as classed actors.

The salience of gender as a dimension of class struggle is germane to this study's focus on identity as an enabling and limiting factor in labour resistance. The dissertation shows how and why particular collective workplace identities predispose workers to act in certain ways, ranging from acquiescence to total non-cooperation. It develops this hypothesis to demonstrate that class struggle invariably manifests in the subjective sphere as a struggle over identity, or more precisely a struggle between ideologies from which identities are interpellated. Ideologies from within and without the workplace vie as paradigms for workers to interpret and then react to their predicament as wage labourers. Workers themselves are active in this process, creating new workplace ideologies from a synthesis of personal observation, external influences and assessments of what has come before. These ideologies form the basis for workplace identities that

embody a particular understanding of objective interests and the possibilities for change.

The dissertation shows how the concepts of sweated labour, career service and producerism defined distinct and historically specific ideologies in the history of Australian telephony. It outlines how each of these ideologies in its own way impelled workers' resistance in certain directions, encouraging particular issues and courses of action over others. By emphasising both the enabling and limiting characteristics of work ideologies, the dissertation reaffirms the importance of workers' own agency while recognising the constraints on agency as historically specific and therefore mutable.

The focus on workers as resisting subjects also provides a fresh approach to understanding trade unionism. The narrative represents the development of unionism within telephony as an expression of the workers' will to resist, a will directed not only at the material deprivations and inequity of working in a telephone exchange but also the psychological and physiological damage of working as unfree producers. When this will contracted or was diverted by management or state initiated strategies of cooption, unionism also contracted, giving greater scope for conservatism to flourish. From this perspective unionism is more than merely a bargaining instrument; the union expressed, albeit in a limited fashion, the producers' desire for and the possibility of sovereignty over working life.

The main body of the dissertation takes the form of a narrative. This is not merely a matter of convention. The intention is to engage with theoretical issues historically, ensuring that the real subject/s of the study never disappear behind theoretical categories, and that workers' collective power to change themselves and the world, as revealed through time, is always before our gaze. While not a celebratory history of the telephonists and their union, it is a partisan history which seeks to acknowledge the contribution these workers made to social progress and reclaim the neglected history of their industrial achievements.

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Abbreviations

ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
ALP	Australian Labor Party
API	Australian Postal Institute
APO	Australian Post Office
APWU	Amalgamated Postal Workers' Union
ATEA	Australian Telecommunications Employees' Association
ATPOA	Australian Telephone and Phonogram Officers' Association
CAGEO	Council of Australian Government Employees' Organisations
CCPSO	Council of Commonwealth Public Service Organisations
CEEP	Commonwealth Employees (Employment Provisions) Act
CEPU	Communication, Electrical and Plumbing Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CPSA	Commonwealth Public Service Association (Fourth Division Officers)
CPSCA	Commonwealth Public Service Clerical Association
CTOA	Commonwealth Telephone Officers' Association
CWU	Communication Workers' Union
EYL	Eureka Youth League
GPO	General Post Office
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
MAC	Manual Assistance Centre
OBU	One Big Union
PMG	Postmaster-General's Department
RSI	Repetitive Strain Injury
SEQEB	South East Queensland Electricity Board
STD	Subscriber Trunk Dialling
TDTPCU	Third Division Telegraphists' and Postal Clerks' Union
TTOA	Telecom Technical Officers' Association
VLTA	Victorian Lady Teachers' Association
VWPSA	Victorian Women Public Servants' Association
VWPTA	Victorian Women's Post and Telegraph Association
WEB	Women's Employment Board
WPA	Women's Political Association
WTTA	Women Telephone Attendants' Association